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First Lady of the Arctic

Miriam Look met Arctic explorer Donald MacMillan when she was five years old. Twenty-five years later they married. If their life together hadn't been an adventure story, it would still be a marvelous love story.

by Jay Sperling

☐ *THE OLD PHOTOGRAPHS SHOW THEM on board their beloved schooner, the* Bowdoin. *She is young, blond, and curly-haired, with a mischievous grin and foursquare stance that proclaim her someone who has corralled life in a most pleasing fashion. He is in his sixties, with a lifetime of Arctic exploration already behind him, but the whitening fringe of hair is belied by the still-young, vigorous face. In these black and white photos she is usually at the helm, dressed in the sealskin boots and heavy parka of the Arctic explorer, her hands confidently gripping the polished mahogany wheel. He stares towards the horizon with an inquisitive expression that suggests his boundless curiosity.*

Miriam Look, daughter of a renowned and well-traveled engineer, descendant of a family of tough South Addison, Maine, sea captains, was still a child when she first met Donald Baxter MacMillan. Recently returned from Peary's triumphant 1908-9 North Pole expedition, MacMillan was on his way to becoming perhaps the most famous Arctic explorer of all. In the quarter century between that first meeting and their marriage in 1935, he made 14 voyages to the Arctic, venturing along the uncharted, treacherous coasts of Labrador, Greenland, Ellesmere Island, and the Polar Sea. During one extended expedition of 51 uninterrupted months,

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Miriam MacMillan took her trick at the wheel of the Bowdoin *in the iceberg-clogged waters of the Arctic in the late 1930s. The crew members called her Lady Mac and said she was "a good scout and a good sailor."*

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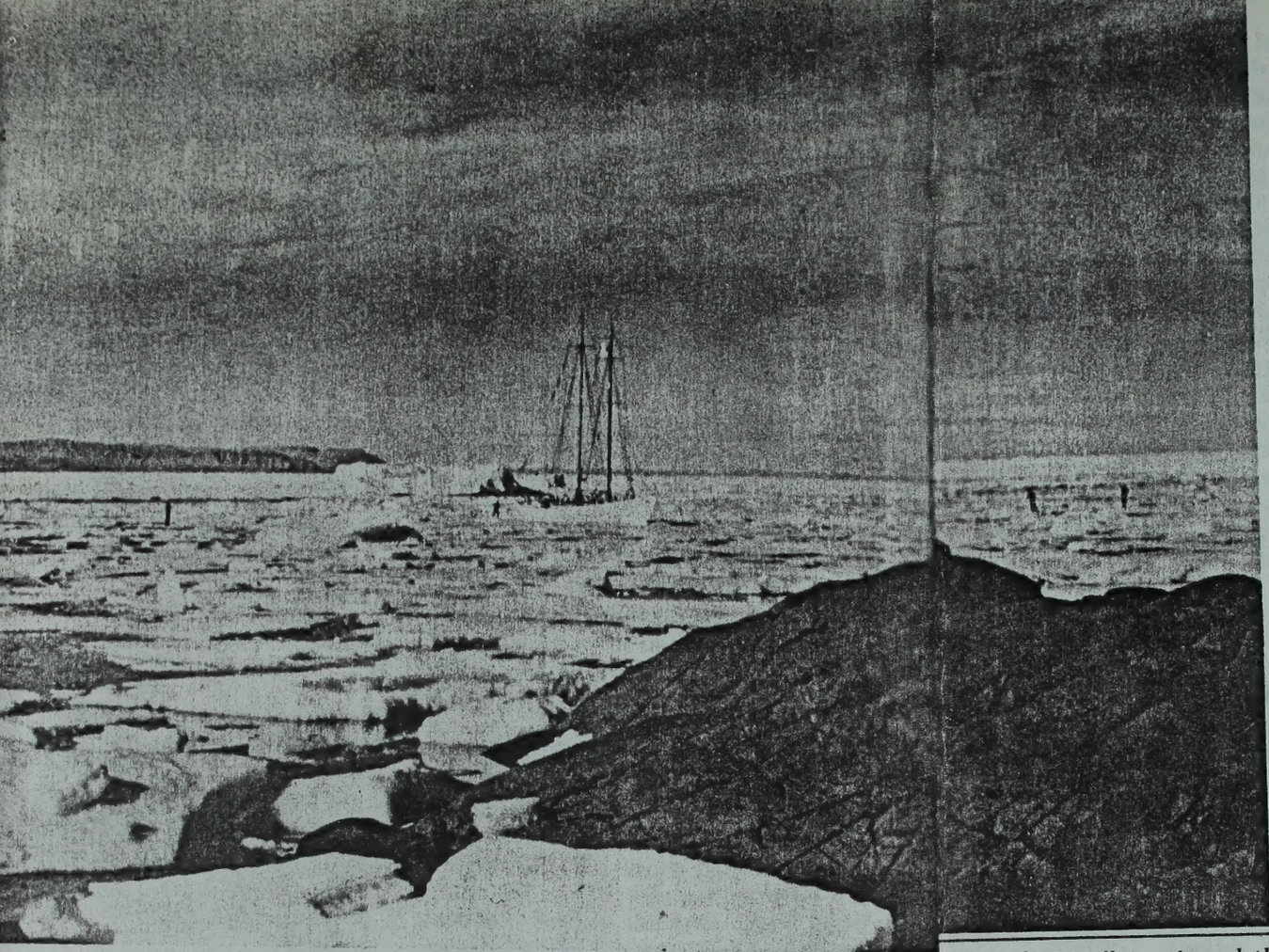

Above: *Outbound from Jakobshavn, Greenland, Miriam and Mac held the Eskimo pups Kahda and Alningwah, gifts of the Danish governor Aage Knudsen in 1939.*

Left: *During a 20-minute shore visit on a 1947 trip to Cape Sabine, Ellesmere Island, where 18 members of the Greely expedition had perished from starvation in 1884, the* Bowdoin *was suddenly surrounded by heavy pack ice. Mac, Miriam, and others had to jump from floe to floe in order to get back to the ship.*

Left, bottom: *Miriam admired the beaded ceremonial costume of a South Greenlander aboard the* Bowdoin *in 1939. The boots and trousers were made of sealskin.*

he headed a small scientific party that lived with the polar Eskimos, surviving on walrus and polar bear meat. The party disproved the existence of the long-rumored Crockerland, recovered records cached by previous adventurers, and undertook extensive geological, anthropological, meteorological, and botanical observations. On returning, MacMillan presented the expedition's sponsors with a 3,000-word compilation of the Eskimo language, thousands of photographs, nearly two miles of motion picture film, and innumerable preserved specimens.

On two later expeditions he intentionally froze the 88-foot Bowdoin *into the dangerous Arctic ice for the winter.*

Following their marriage, Miriam and "Mac" continued the Arctic voyages, venturing into new territory, constantly adding scientific knowledge to the hard-won store of information about this mysterious region. They became a polished, accomplished team, and even if their life together weren't such a terrific adventure story, it would still be a marvelous love story.

Today, Miriam MacMillan lives in Owls Head, Maine, where she shares a house with her "adopted" daughter Helga and Helga's husband, Dr. Ed Morse, themselves veterans of Bowdoin *voyages. Admiral MacMillan passed away in 1970 at the age of 96, but Miriam continues their work. She busies herself organizing notes and journals, cataloging wire recordings and motion pictures, labeling photographs.*

Pausing on her sunny porch long enough to reminisce, she is surrounded by the memorabilia of an Arctic life: a portrait of the icebound Bowdoin, *a lamp fashioned from the six-foot spiral tusk of a narwhal, innumerable Eskimo carvings. The picture windows face east toward a few stately pines and across the Gulf of Maine. If one could see far enough, the view would include Cape Sable at the exposed western tip of Nova Scotia, the Strait of Belle Isle between Newfoundland and Labrador, and the long sea that leads enticingly into the Arctic.*

Whenever we went north we always had food for 15 people for a year, in case we got stuck.

We had been married a little while when one day Mac said, "Well, I guess

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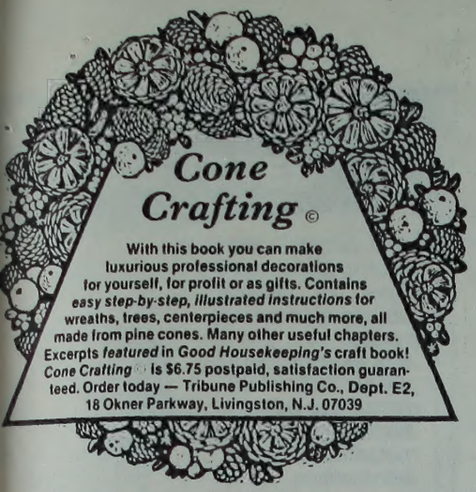

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FIRST LADY OF THE ARCTIC

(continued from page 133)

what I have to do to get ready to go north." I said, "Oh, going north again?" I thought perhaps he'd stay home for a while. So I suggested it would be good to go to Europe instead, since he had never been there. He finally agreed to go, but he was just bored. No icebergs, no Eskimos, no adventure. He wasn't the least bit interested until we got to Norway because that seemed more like the Arctic. After that, I knew he'd be going back to the Arctic.

I was quite a bit younger than Mac. I was just turning five when I first met him. He came to Brown's Station, New York, where my father was building the Ashokan Dam, to speak about the North Pole expedition. When he got off at the train station, I ran up to him and grabbed his hand. And I never let go! He came up to our house and I crawled into his lap and put my arm around his neck and listened to his stories about the Eskimos and polar bears and walrus. I said to myself, "This is the one for me." I didn't say it aloud, of course, but I stuck right to it. He said later that he waited for me to grow up.

Whenever he came back from the Arctic he would come to visit us. He and my father became very good friends. My father was president of the MacMillan Arctic Association, and he helped Mac raise the money to build the *Bowdoin*, which Mac never could have done by himself.

Later I was in business with a publicity company, and they sent me to Chicago as office manager. Mac came out to Chicago to lecture, and I said to him, "Oh, I wish I could leave Chicago and get back to New England." He wrote me a letter, saying, "I wish you would come back and help me out. I need so much done here." So I gave up my job and came back—for much, much less money, but I didn't care.

He was living in Provincetown with his sister. We'd go through all his photographs and motion pictures, because he had to put titles on all his thousands of feet of 35mm film. Then we'd go off and play a game of golf.

In 1934 he went on a trip to the Arctic. When he looked back and said, "Well, Miriam, I'll see you when I get back," why, I almost leaped on board! The next year we got married. I really didn't think about going to the Arctic. Of course, I knew I would love to go.

In 1937 he went north on the *Gertrude Thebaud*. I couldn't go on that one because there were 37 men on board, but I went by steamer to Hopedale, Labrador, with a friend to meet him—we had quite a time getting there. We got dressed up in Eskimo clothing and went out to greet the *Thebaud*. When she arrived we were paddling around with the Eskimos yelling, *"Aksunai! Aksunai! Illitarnamek!"* (Hello, good friends) and saying every Eskimo thing we knew. "Miriam!" he said when I came on board, "I didn't even recognize you."

The Eskimos went crazy whenever he arrived. *"Seekonah! MacMillanekut!"* they'd holler through the whole village. They'd be watching, watching, to see that white *Seekonah* (schooner) and Mac. They thought the world of him, I can say that. The polar Eskimos were great people.

The next year, when he was getting ready to go again, I said, "Oh, I wish I could go with you."

"I couldn't possibly take you," he said. "I've never taken a woman. Why, the men would throw you overboard."

But I was very smart. I didn't say much; I just kept getting the food ready. Whenever we went north we always had food for 15 people for a year, in case we got stuck, and getting it all on board was my job. "Well," he said, "you've done very well. Why don't you go with us as far as Nain and see the school (MacMillan-Moravian School for Eskimo Children) and stay there, then get back with the Eskimos as best you can?"

"All right, that's fine," I said. When we got to Nain I packed up my duffle, ready to leave. Then the men handed me a sealed envelope. "Thank you. I'll read that when I get ashore," I said. Oh,

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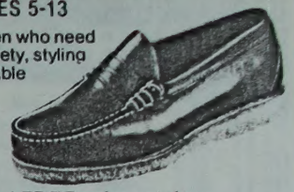

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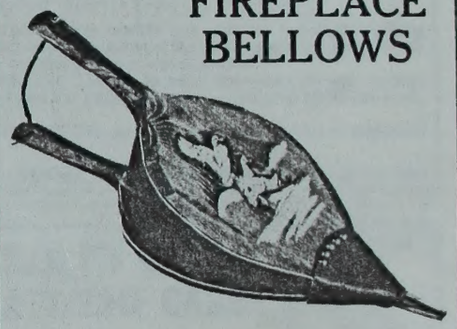

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First Lady (continued)

the tears were coming down my face.

"No, no," they said, "we want you to read it now." I opened it and it said: "Lady Mac is a good scout and a good sailor, and we want her to go the entire trip." They had all signed it. But Mac hadn't signed it; he didn't even know about it. But he signed it gladly. He never asked me again; he knew I was going, and he wanted me to go.

Of course, I took my trick at the wheel, and stood watch forward, and did scullion duty. Even our scientists and college boys all had to do that. He always took scientists: a botanist and an anthropologist, and others, and they would study. The college boys that were with us (we always took five or six, and they helped pay for the trip) would learn from these scientists.

The Arctic is such a beautiful place, but you never know what is going to happen next. Especially you can never, never tell about the ice: when it's coming or what it's going to do. And there were no charts. Just Mac. The only way he worked was to get up in the ice barrel (masthead lookout) and call down, "Starboard. Port. Steady." That's how we navigated in those days. In most places he would never go by a course.

There were ledges, so many ledges, but he knew them all, even on the inside run in Labrador. He had gone alone in a canoe in 1911 to the northern tip of Labrador, and when he was up there in 1913 to 1917 he traveled 10,000 miles by sledge. All the time he was learning the coastline. He knew every corner, and somehow he remembered them.

People always asked me, weren't you scared? I never worried, and I was never scared. I had absolute confidence in Mac and the *Bowdoin*. Mac just inspired confidence. In the worst situations—and we were in plenty, with the *Bowdoin* laid right over on her side and the Eskimos coming around saying we'd never get off — he would just pace the deck and hum. He never was disturbed; just paced and hummed. "Well," he'd say, "let's go down and have a cup of coffee. The tide will come in and we'll be all right." *(continued)*

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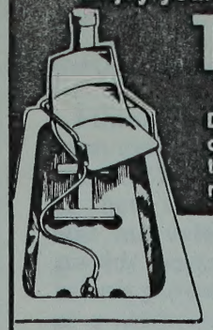

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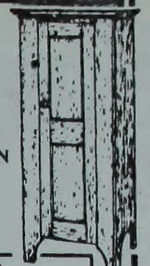

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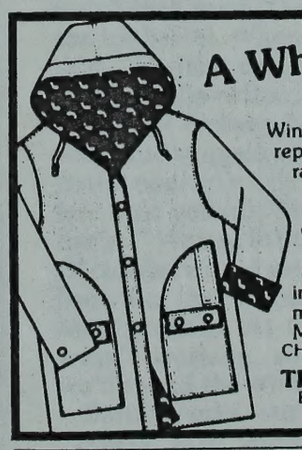

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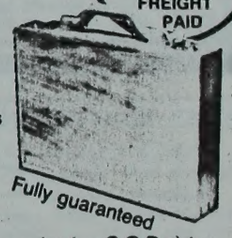

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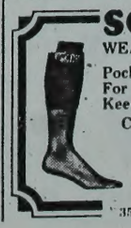

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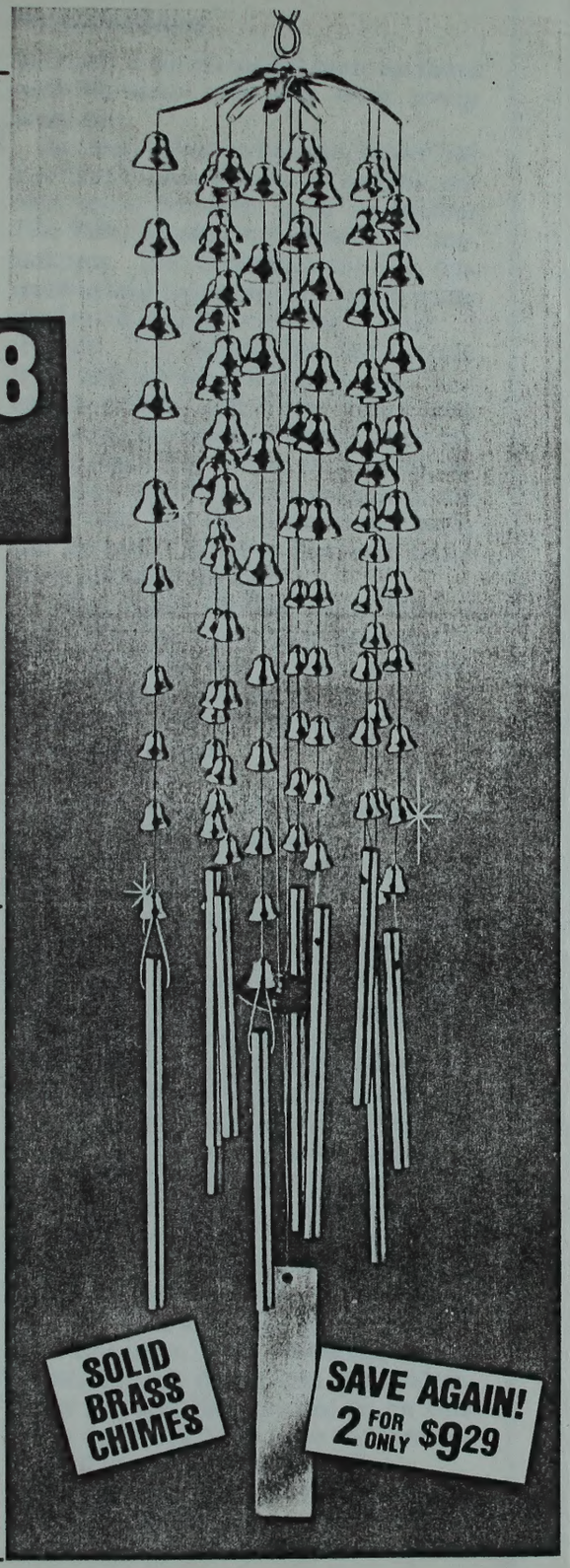

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I think the worst time was when we went to Cape Sabine, where Greely and his men had starved. When we sailed in, there wasn't a pan of ice around. It was marvelous. The National Geographic Society had sent a beautiful bronze plaque for Mac to put up there as a memorial to Greely, and on the 1923-24 expedition Mac sledged over and bolted it on a big boulder. We'd never been able to get in there before because there was always so much ice. But this year it was fine going, and Mac and I and some of the men went ashore hurriedly in the dory. We were standing there looking at the plaque and taking pictures of it, when we heard three toots on the *Bowdoin's* horn. We turned around and saw that she was completely surrounded by heavy, heavy ice! In 20 minutes' time the ice had come out of the Polar Sea and we were really stuck. We had to jump from one pan to another and drag the dory to get back to the *Bowdoin.*

We were there for three days, and it didn't look good. Then Mac went up in the ice barrel. When he came down he said, "Miriam, do you see that iceberg there? I believe that is going to save us."

A giant iceberg had come in crossways and stopped across the current, so that it opened a tiny space in that thick ice. Mac yelled, "Start her up and let her go!" We had to push, and push hard. Of course, we did get out, but if it hadn't been for that iceberg we might have been crushed. At that time our radio wasn't working, so I began to think we'd spend the winter under a dory.

Bertie Banks, our cook, used to say, "What's Mac going through this ice for?" Bertie talked like that. He'd been all his life on a fishing schooner out of Provincetown, but he was scared to death of that ice.

"You know what Mac says," I'd tell him. "If you don't take chances you won't learn. So we're going to learn." But we took the Danish District Man-

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ager and a couple of Eskimos up there with us once, and they were pretty leery, too.

But Mac never lost a man, never had a serious illness. I never got seasick, except once. Someone gave us Mother Sills Pills, an old-time remedy for seasickness. The directions on the box were to take two every few hours when you're in rough weather. "Well," I thought, "I'm feeling fine, but I might try it and see what it does to me." So I took a couple, and a few hours later took a couple more. When it came my turn to take the wheel, they called for me and I couldn't even get out of my bunk! Mac had the doctor come back, and he said, "What in heaven's name have you been taking?"

"Why, these Mother Sills Pills," I said. "They're supposed to help you."

He read what was in them and said, "Oh." They finally got me up and put me on deck, and after a couple hours I was all right again.

We had quite a time on the last trip. We got to northern Labrador, but the ice was so bad we couldn't even get into Bowdoin Harbor. We'd been in there several times before to escape the ice pack, but not this time. So Mac changed course, and I knew we were going to cross Davis Strait to Greenland. That was the only chance we had.

Then Mac went below. In Nain he had been taken ill with a bad cold; several others had the same thing. When it hit him, he felt so dizzy he had to lie down. He couldn't hold his head up.

I was on his watch, so I went up and was on the wheel for two hours. There was a terrific gale blowing. After two hours the rest of the watch hadn't come up. They were sick, too. So when one of the other boys, Tiger, came up, I said, "Tiger, you go down and get Walter. There are just the three of us on this watch now, and it has to be the three of us until the whole time is up."

The *Bowdoin* was going way up on each wave, then crashing down. One of the forward hatches came unsecured,

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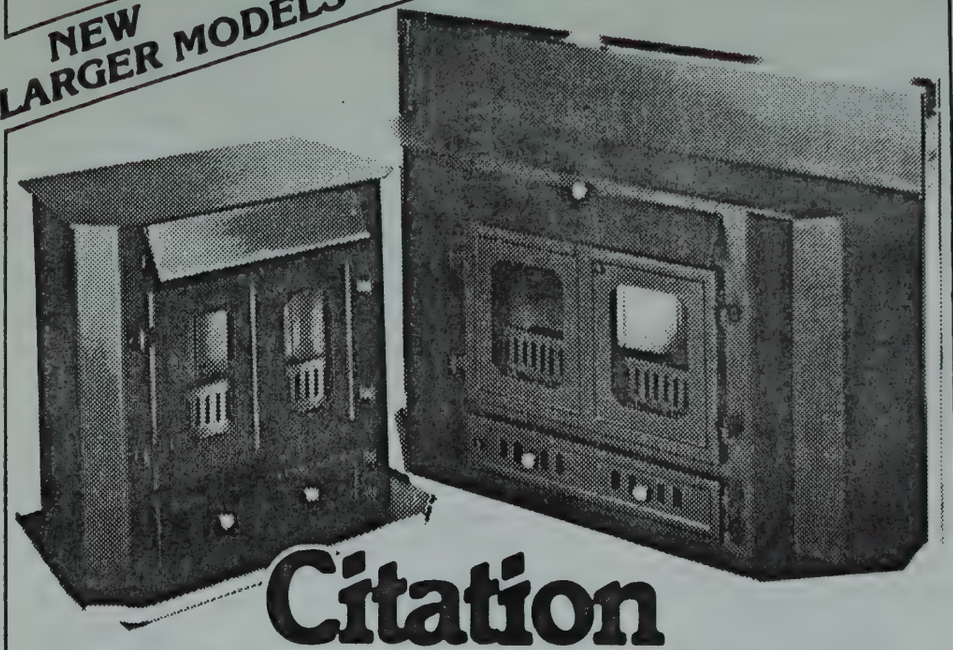

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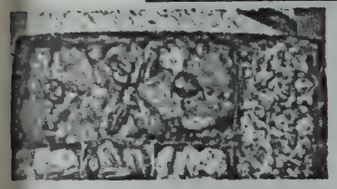

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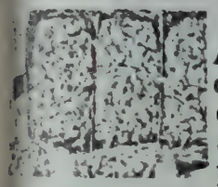

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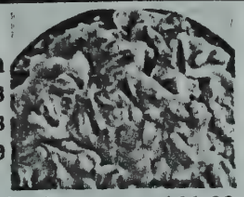

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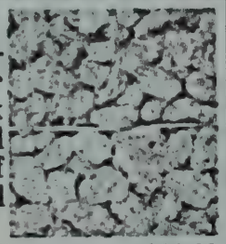

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and every time we went down, water would flood into the fo'c'sle. But we made it, and when we finally were across the strait, Mac got right up out of his bunk and came on deck and got us into Greenland safely.

That was pioneer exploration, no doubt about it. We did things no one had ever done before, in places where people had never traveled. It's altogether different now. My goodness, the equipment they have on the boats now! They may see an iceberg over in Greenland on the radar screen, and they'll go way over to Labrador to get out of the way. Mac wouldn't ease up—we'd keep right on going.

In fact, we'd run out of water quite often and we'd go right up next to an iceberg that had a waterfall pouring out and fill the tanks. That is the purest water in the world. It's just tiny snowflakes that fell in the interior of Greenland thousands of years ago. It formed into glaciers, and the glaciers break off as icebergs.

I love the Arctic. I love it. I'd go right back again. But I will say I loved it as it was. The changes have been so tremendous. In 1954, on the last trip, there were three thousand men up there. Before, when we went into Thule, there'd be just a few kayaks. But on the last trips there would be an icebreaker at the dock and big things being unloaded when we'd come in with the tiny little *Bowdoin* and tie up. One time there were a couple of Navy fellows on the dock and one of them said, "What in the halls of hell is that thing?" Since they had trouble getting there in the icebreaker, they couldn't imagine how we got there in the *Bowdoin*.

After Mac died, the natives in Nain got together in 1971 to have a 200th anniversary of the landing of the Moravian missionaries in Labrador. They wanted me to come, so all the natives took up a collection and paid my way. They reenacted the Moravian landing and had quite a big time of it. I stayed about a week at the school, and I saw many people that I knew. But it was so changed. They even have a hotel in Nain now. *(continued)*

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We had a great life together. Mac was so young in every way. He loved fun, and he loved to joke. When the scientists brought anything on board he'd be so interested. He always had a dictionary at his side, one of those huge ones.

At the end he had glaucoma and could hardly see. We were living in Boston, but I worried about the traffic. So I called down to Ed Morse and said, "If you ever see a place on the water, get it for us." This place in Owls Head came up and he bought it.

When I first came down here I was the only one here. All these other places were just summer cottages. After Mac died I was alone for ten years. I simply worked on all this material to get it ready for the Peary-MacMillan Museum (at Bowdoin College). I'd get ten boxes or so of stuff organized and take it down to them, then come back and work on some more.

There are two great memorials to Mac: the museum and the *Bowdoin*. I'm honorary curator at the museum, and I've been busy with the project to restore the *Bowdoin*. I so want her to come through fine. Oh, that *Bowdoin* was something . . . what we got into, and back out of! I've had wonderful contacts with the boys that sailed with us—I call them boys, but of course they're all grown-up men now. Some of them write and say they are so sorry their own children can't have the same experience. A lot of them are on the restoration committee. It's like a family, and the *Bowdoin* is part of that family.

I was just elected to the Explorers Club. I was really pleased. I suppose I've had more Arctic exploring than most people: I made nine trips with Mac, and maintained the school for years, and made the first wire recordings ever made of the polar Eskimos. There aren't too many women who get admitted, you know, so I was especially pleased.

About two years ago a man called me from Ontario and told me his mother-in-law was a real polar Eskimo. You see, the polar Eskimos have been moved beyond Thule now, to a separate village. There are only about 300 of them left. He said that she had come to visit, "and about the only thing she wants is to come to see you."

I said, "Oh, my, that is wonderful!" So they drove all the way down here. She had been on the *Bowdoin*—the Eskimos would all come on board because they all knew Mac—and she showed me her picture in an old *National Geographic*. *"May, may,"* (me,me) she said, pointing at her picture. It was really wonderful to see her.

It's been a great life. □□

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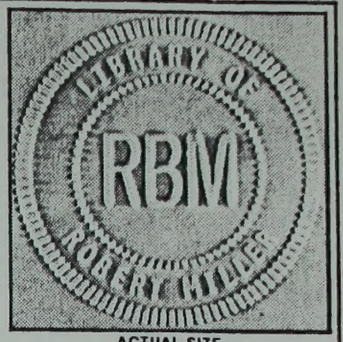

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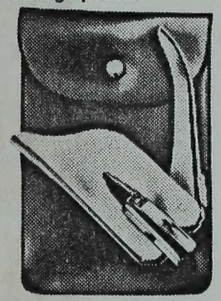

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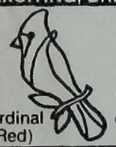

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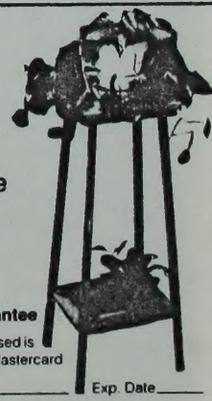

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